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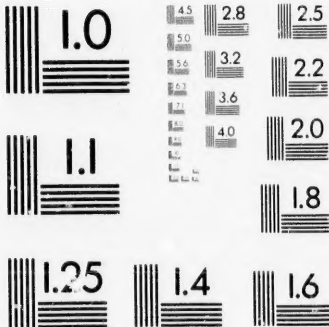
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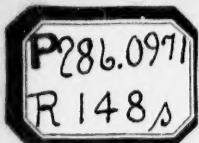
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A SHORT ACCOUNT OF A CORRESPONDENCE

BETWEEN THE

Lord Bishop of Montreal

(METROPOLITAN OF CANADA)

AND

MR. JUSTICE RAMSAY

RESPECTING THE SUSPENSION OF

*THE REV. A. PRIME*

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MONTREAL  
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It is not possible to over-rate the importance of the question involved in the suspension of the Rev. Mr. Prime. It is avowedly a complete absorption by the Bishop of the individual liberty of the clergy, against which all sensible men should unite, whatever their church politics may be. A foolish low-churchman may glory in the suspension of Mr. Prime as a party triumph; but every man of reflection will observe that it is something more, and that the tyrannical act of a fanatical low-church Bishop may be quoted as a very convenient precedent by some fanatical high-church Bishop elsewhere. People who studiously avoid using the argument, will console themselves silently with the idea that there is no danger in that quarter, that there is no fear in our day of any Bishop's omnipotence. They flatter themselves that, imitating Bishop Oxenden, Bishops will only venture on such perilous proceedings when they feel secure that the arbitrary act is agreeable to the wishes of a powerful faction. So long as the short-sighted dreamer is a unit of such a faction he may have some cause for so consoling himself; but it is not easy to believe that a community pretending to exist under the sanction of moral and religious Law can generally take so common, I had almost said so base, a view of the subject. Churchmen generally desire to know on what ground such a suspension took place, and whether the grounds can be generalized; in other words whether it is an isolated and arbitrary act, or an act which can be justified on principle. If the former it must be condemned; if the latter, it must be approved. So strongly was I impressed with the apparent injustice of the proceeding that so far back as the 14th of July, I addressed a letter to the Bishop, telling him how the matter struck me, and begging of him to re-consider his decision. To this letter I received an answer thanking me for writing to him on the subject, and expressing the "hope that when I had an opportunity of looking calmly at the whole question I would exonerate him (the Bishop) of all blame." As the only justification of the suspension contained in the Bishop's answer to me is to be found in the following sentence, it will be seen that the Bishop, either by design or inadvertence, failed to

give me any opportunity of changing the opinion I had formed from the short notice in the Gazette published by authority. The Bishop said: "Having given Mr. Prime his licence only two months ago, and under *very peculiar circumstances* "(the italics are the Bishop's own)" I felt no hesitation whatever in withdrawing it, since he had forfeited (*sic*) the terms on which he received it."

My perplexity was increased by this peculiar way of putting the case. The circulation of two copies of "The Rule of life" with a modified approbation of its contents, was not the sole ground of the suspension! Mr. Prime might have circulated the rule of Life and retained his licence had he received it more than two months ago, and had it not been given under *very peculiar circumstances*.

I expected shortly to have an opportunity of meeting the Bishop, and I wrote to him, saying, that if he had no objection I would discuss the matter with him personally. The meeting took place, but resulted in nothing more explicit than the answer already given. The Bishop still harped on the circumstances under which the licence was granted, but without specifying what they were. From his total helplessness to furnish any valid reason for his action in the matter, I believed he would recede from his false position, and I remained under that belief until I heard of his answer to the Congregation of St. John's. Then I began fully to understand the disposition and character of the person with whom I had to deal, and I resolved to be guided by the experience I had gained. Being under the necessity of declining to take part in some arrangements connected with two country missions, I deemed it right to explain to the Bishop that the manner in which Mr. Prime had been treated was the cause which must prevent me joining in any work in the church, so long as the Bishop could exercise such dangerous powers.

The Bishop adroitly attempted to divert the discussion from the merits of Mr. Prime's suspension to the demerits of my letter, and to the pain it gave him. I did not allow myself to be diverted from the real point in issue by this *ruse de guerre*, and I pressed upon His Lordship that he owed it, if not to the church at large, at all events to the congregation of St. Johns, to give something like a valid reason for suspending one of their clergymen, and disturbing their services; and I added, that this he had avoided doing on all occasions.

To this the Bishop replied that his reasons had been stated again and again and that he did not feel it desirable to go over the ground afresh.

On the receipt of this letter, to avoid all quibbling, I put the Bishop the following questions:

Qu. 1. Did you suspend Mr. Prime on his admission that he had circulated two copies of "the Rule of Life," directing the persons to whom he gave them *merely* to the prayers, Mr. Prime at the same time tendering his submission to cease to circulate them if you desired it? Or—

Qu. 2. Did you suspend Mr. Prime because his licence was granted under peculiar circumstances only two months prior to the suspension, because he had violated the terms on which he received it, and consequently that he had forfeited your confidence? If the latter, it will be necessary to state the peculiar circumstances and the violation of the terms of the licence.

In answer to this direct and straight-forward way of arriving at a conclusion of the discussion, the Bishop declined to repeat or amplify the reasons he had given me for withdrawing Mr. Prime's licence.

I leave it to the readers of these lines to decide whether this answer is anything more than a subterfuge. I could understand the Bishop honestly saying to me, I shall render you no account of my proceedings; but it is not honest to give as a reason "*very peculiar circumstances*" which he declines to disclose.

As the Bishop refused to specify what the peculiar circumstances were which gave him more right to suspend Mr. Prime than any other clergyman in his Diocese who might have circulated two copies of "the Rule of Life," I wrote to Mr. Prime asking him the two following questions:

(1) Was there anything *very* peculiar in the circumstances under which you received your licence, and if so in what did it consist?

(2) Did your licence contain any conditions which you violated by circulating two copies of "the Rule of Life?"

To this Mr. Prime answered:

"The only circumstance which can be called peculiar under which I received my licence, consisted in a private examination, conducted by His Lordship himself, (the minutes of which I have preserved) on some points of doctrine and practice"

The answer to the second question, was a copy of the licence in which there is no special reservation, except that it should last only for a year.

It therefore appears that the only term violated is that which the Bishop has himself broken without cause. If, along with this refusal to give an unequivocal answer to a plain question, we take unto consideration the fact of notice having been taken of an accusation so irregularly brought as was this one against the clergy of St. John the Evangelist's, the unfortunate threat the Bishop threw out in Synod, to gratify those who were hooting and ill-treating one of his clergy in

a meeting over which he (the Bishop) presided, the unseemly haste of the letter of suspension, written during an absence of three days at Lennoxville, the publication, by authority, in the Gazette, of a truncated and unfair account of the correspondence,—can any one be blamed for saying, that the Bishop has put forth a false excuse to justify himself in getting rid of Mr. Prime, and that he had determined to accomplish this feat at the very moment when he greeted his beloved in Christ, the Reverend Augustus Prime, in whose Fidelity, Morals, Learning, Sound Doctrine and Diligence, he Ashton, by Divine Permission, Bishop of Montreal, fully confided ? Under such patronage we may expect religious fun-making will not decrease, at all events in the Diocese of Montreal.

It only remains for me to express my regret for the lamentable and painful position into which the Bishop has got himself, and which the most stolid indifference to reason can scarcely alleviate.

T. K. R.

Montreal, October 1871.



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